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ABSTRACT

Teaching always occurs in a rhetorical context. It involves discovering and maintaining a proper balance among three elements at work in any communicative effort: the available arguments about the subject itself, the interests and peculiarities of the audience, and the voice of the speaker. Teacher management of the classroom, writing assignments, and comments on student papers reflect this rhetorical stance. Effective teachers emphasize classroom writing practice over formal lectures. They spend significantly less time talking about writing than other teachers might but plan many more activities that encourage students to plan, draft, and rewrite progressively more complicated pieces. Conscious of student needs, they compose each writing assignment carefully--assessing its relationship to previous work, anticipating possible problems, and planning other material to supplement the assignment. They use marginal comments and endnotes as a written dialogue with students about their writing, a private tutorial that explains not just what to do but how. Concerned with the relationships among students, teachers, and the composing process, the teaching of writing is necessarily a rhetorical art. (MM)

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TEACHING AS A RHETORICAL ART

As the director of a large writing program, I have frequent opportunities to discuss teaching problems with faculty members and teaching assistants. Many of these teachers enjoy their students and discuss their writing courses enthusiastically. Others consider teaching composition a duty; they fight the assignment or believe that their efforts are wasted. Some of the time, then, I feel as if I'm sharing a conversion experience with another kindred soul. We agree on the importance of what we're doing; we willingly share teaching strategies; we solve problems by mutual consent. At other times, I encounter unhappiness, a kind of resistence which may express itself as hostility toward students or toward other teachers, as criticism of the textbooks, the syllabus, the teaching schedule, and the size of the class, or as statements about the hopelessness of teaching anyone anything about writing. Over the years, I've observed that those who most detest the teaching of writing feel least confident about what they are doing. Their complaints seem to stem mostly from insecurity, from sometimes totally subconscious feelings of inadequacy. They believe that they know how to teach writing, but at the same time they doubt that they're making much of a difference. Those who enjoy teaching composition--and they may be young or old, experienced or first-semester teachers--have confidence. They know what works, and if it doesn't, why. They aren't afraid to work through difficult teaching and writing problems with students. They risk. They stretch themselves.

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What is it that separates the secure from the insecure? The confident from the reluctant writing teacher? What does one group know, or do, or believe that the other group doesn't?

Fortunately, confidence isn't a matter of age. We don't have to be near retirement to teach writing well. To be sure, I've learned much from those who have taught composition for years, who've seen fads come and go, who are experienced writers and know firsthand what wars with words are all about. But first-year teachers have also taught me much: a respect for freshmen, the value of listening instead of talking all the time, an ability to appreciate the power of language without overwhelming students with the latinate terminology of formal grammar. Becoming a confident teacher, then, isn't just a matter of age.

Nor is it the result of book learning. I know many fine writing teachers who've never read Aristotle, Quintilian, Cicero, Chomsky, Moffett, Piaget, Kinneavy, Macrorie, or Cooper and Odell. Conversely, I know some teachers thoroughly familiar with rhetorical theories but unable to translate them into practical help for students. I don't mean to underestimate book learning. We can learn much from the disciplines that explain how people use language. Literary criticism, linguistics, psychology, philosophy, education, rhetoric--all of these fields and their subspecialties can prevent us from repeating mistakes or teaching by trial-and-error. More important, book learning gives us a coherent framework for our teaching. Book learning equips us with what-knowledge; it helps us know what we're doing and why. It tells us, for example, that writing teaches writing, that the best way to teach writing is to let students write and to give them constructive responses to their performances. Why? Because writing is not a subject to be talked about, but an activity to practice.

But most book learning stops there. What we learn from reading is essentially theoretical, historical, or empirical. Books too infrequently concern themselves

with the practice of teaching. Effective teachers, however, have the skill, the happy ability to translate theory into practice. They manage the leap from what-knowledge to how-knowledge, transforming what they want to teach into a successful interaction with students. They have this ability, I believe, because they are effective rhetoricians. They can communicate a course outline, an assignment, a lesson plan, a set of comments on a student's paper to an audience they appreciate and know reasonable well. They may not know consciously that they are behaving rhetorically, but most of the time, effective teachers control well the balancing act Wayne Booth describes in "The Rhetorical Stance" [CCC, 14(October 1963), 139-45].

The "common ingredient" Booth finds in all of the writing he admires is something he calls "the rhetorical stance, a stance which depends on discovering and maintaining in any writing situation a proper balance among the three elements that are at work in any communicative effort: the available arguments about the subject itself, the interests and peculiarities of the audience and the voice, the implied character, of the speaker." Just as effective writers find a balance between subject, audience and their voice, so do effective teachers. Teaching, like writing, occurs in a rhetorical context. Someone says something to someone else for a purpose. We need to remember, of course, that in a writing class, students are often teachers, teaching each other or themselves. The paid professional responsible for the class may also be a student, learning about composing from members of the class. Nevertheless, teaching, like writing, brings these elements--teacher, student, subject--together in proportions that vary from one teacher and class meeting to the next. Like writing, teaching expresses itself in several forms of discourse--lectures, class discussion, conferences, writing workshops, assignments, comments on papers. All of these forms of discourse exhibit special rhetorical strategies and aims. How we teach depends on what we teach, who our students are, and what persona we adopt. As we plan, execute, and

revise our teaching performance, we continually realign our relationship to our students and subject, eventually developing a style which best expresses our teaching self.

But teachers, like writers, sometimes fail to maintain "a proper balance among the three elements that are at work in any communicative effort." They overplay or underplay some elements, creating "unbalanced stances" which promote ineffective teaching. When the subject--a model essay, grammar, paragraph unity, a textbook, a work of literature--becomes the primary focus of a writing class, the teacher has adopted "the pedant's stance," which Booth defines as "ignoring or underplaying the personal relationship of speaker and audience and depending entirely on statements about a subject." Such a teacher forgets that courses about writing give students too little practice doing writing. Similarly, we may know teachers who assume what Booth calls "the entertainer's stance." Such teachers need to be the center of attention, need to cultivate the persona of a comedian, an expert, a good ole boy or girl. They sacrifice substance and students to their own personalities, charms, or needs. Their students either respond by becoming embarrassed or by showing compassionate tolerance as they help the teacher affirm his or her self-esteem. Teachers can also adopt Booth's "advertiser's stance" which undervalues the subject and the teacher's voice and overvalues the audience. When this happens, students take control of the class, usually because the teacher is afraid of students or wants to give them more responsibility for their own learning than they may be able to handle. All of these unbalanced stances result from a teacher's failure to make effective rhetorical choices. They can characterize not only the classroom but also writing assignments and responses to student papers, two other contexts in which teaching-as-rhetoric occurs. Let's examine the balanced stance in each of these three contexts.

In a writing class, the confident teacher knows her material, her students, and herself well enough to act as a guide for less experienced writers. The

classroom becomes a place where students practice writing. What she has to say matters less than what her students do. She spends significantly less time talking about writing than other teachers might but plans many more activities that encourage students to plan, draft, and rewrite progressively more complicated pieces. She replaces lectures with discussion and individual conferences as students work alone or in groups. She encourages peer-teaching so that students become better able to evaluate their own work. She tends to avoid formal rhetorical or grammatical terminology and workbook-ish exercises because they can become ends in themselves, not means to helping students develop confidence in and control over their composing habits. Students write frequently in class; they discuss student papers; they work out alternative ways to approach assignments and writing problems; they exchange drafts of work-in-progress. If something called "paragraph unity" needs attention, the effective writing teacher isn't likely to lecture on it or run the class through a series of lockstep exercises in a textbook. Instead, the class is more likely to examine several student paragraphs from previous papers, discussing what strategies the writers used to hold paragraphs together. Then, the class is likely to create several paragraphs, practicing the techniques and responding to their work. Students learn by doing. Their activity, not textbooks or lectures, defines the course. I once asked a teacher who conducts his class this way how he managed to pack so much activity into one hour. He told me that he prepares class by answering three questions:

1. What do my students need to practice?
2. What will show them how to do that? What student writing can we discuss to let them know they're halfway there?
3. What can they do in class to gain confidence with the technique?

"What can they do?" is a very different question, of course, from "What can I do in class today?"

A second context in which the writing teacher makes rhetorical choices is in drafting assignments. Traditional assignments are generally inadequate because they omit, distort, or leave to guesswork too much necessary information. They tend to ignore students' needs and overplay the topic of the assignments, the number of words required, or the widths of margins. Often, assignments are composed orally in class or slapped on the board as the bell rings. Consequently, students are likely to produce vague, general compositions addressed to no one in particular about a subject they may be only mildly interested in. Writing assignments ought to be a teaching tool. They hold a course together; they determine the kinds of practice students have with writing; they serve as the basis for much class discussion. So, we need to compose each assignment carefully, assessing its relationship to other assignments, anticipating problems students might have, planning class discussions, groupwork, or other instruction to supplement the assignment. If the assignment is to teach composing and not simply how high students can jump hurdles for a grade, we need to write them out--and rethink them and revise them--until they reflect appropriate decisions about the abilities of our students and the task we are asking them to do. We need to ask ourselves questions. What do I want my students to do? Why? Is it worth doing? How do I want them to do the assignment? In what ways am I giving them practice planning, drafting, and rewriting their work? Have I given them enough information to make effective decisions about their subject, purpose, form, mode, and audience? How does this assignment build on the practice they've had so far and prepare for more complicated tasks later on? How much time in and out of class will students need for prewriting, writing, and rewriting? How will I evaluate their work? What defines a "successful"response to this assignment? One way to answer these questions is to write with our students, responding to our own assignments. If

students improve their writing through guided practice, then writing assignments represent the major means of practicing the decisions writers make. Effective assignments must be longer than one sentence and give more information than a title. They need to incorporate as many of the factors as possible which, in real life, help us define and solve rhetorical problems. When they don't, we invite students to perform poorly and miss an opportunity to help them become fluent in composing.

When we respond to the writing our students submit, we also need to remember rhetorical principles that govern how we express messages and how our audience is likely to respond. The only appropriate purpose for comments on student papers is to offer feedback and guide learning--to teach. Some comments, however, seem to be written for other reasons: to damn the ideas with faint praise or snide remarks, to justify a letter grade, to prove that a teacher can always find more errors than the student, to confuse the writer with cryptic correction symbols, contradictory advice, or mysterious circles and lines. Marginal comments and endnotes must do more than label strengths and weaknesses. They represent an on-going written dialogue with the student about his or her writing, a private tutorial which explains not just what to do but how.

First, comments should encourage students to review their work so that they may apply what they've learned in writing this paper or draft to the next. That means noting strengths as well as weaknesses, pointing out how something done well in paragraph three could also improve paragraph seven. Second, marginal comments should address a range of discourse features, not just spelling, punctuation, and word choice. We need to respond to or ask questions about sentence and paragraph structure, organization, supporting evidence, the writer's purpose and point of view, and so on. Third, marginal comments should avoid excessive correction symbols, technical terminology, and the private code

English teachers and editors know so well. The languages of copy-editing and teaching are different. Our comments are intended for students, not other teachers, not grammarians, not typesetters. We can also monitor students' planning and rewriting strategies if we ask them to submit scratchwork, freewritings, and drafts. If scratchwork is skimpy, we can suggest additional prewriting strategies to rid future papers of unsupported generalizations. If drafts aren't messy enough or reveal that "rewriting" seems to mean "substituting a word here and there," our comments can help students change what they do when they revise.

Finally, the endnote can help us teach writing if we use it for more than justifying a grade on a paper the student has already forgotten about. That paper is finished, as far as the student is concerned, and unless it requires substantial revision, the endnote must serve a different purpose. Its purpose can be to set goals for the next writing project. We can summarize the marginal comments, applaud progress, and suggest specific ways to build on that progress next time. Most of my endnotes follow a similar formula, which nevertheless varies a little depending on the student and the kinds of problems he or she needs to work on. I compose endnotes by answering the following three questions (usually in this order):

1. What has this writer done well?
2. What are one or two major problems and why do they create difficulty for a reader? Here, I usually select one or two problems to work on in the next paper--only one or two--and explain why they make the message less effective than it could be. Sometimes the problems are ones the student wants to work on, information I learn from notes students attach to their papers when they turn them in.
3. Specifically, how can the writer solve the problem? What can he or she do to reach the goal I'm setting?

Most teachers' endnotes answer the first two questions but often neglect the third. It's not enough to say "Your sentences are choppy" or "Vary sentence structure more." Those words define a problem, to be sure, but they don't offer much help to the student who wants to know how to solve it. They don't teach. Rather, they force the student to experiment by trial-and-error until perhaps three papers and four weeks later sentences stop being choppy. To reach the goal more efficiently, the endnote could suggest how to vary sentences, could prescribe some explicit behavior the writer can practice next time. I'd want to add something like this: "After you get your ideas down in a rough draft, combine and tighten some of your sentences. Try introductory clauses, series, and some of the other constructions you've been practicing in the sentence-combining exercises in class. If I see you taking some risks with your sentences, don't worry about comma problems; we'll tackle them later."

Good writing teachers enjoy their work with students because they are confident of what they're doing. Their confidence may result from experience or from knowledge, from years of teaching or abundant reading. But the skills they have, the sorts of things they do, are not the exclusive property of the well-read and the experienced. Although writing teachers work with students in many contexts, the three settings I have discussed are perhaps the most significant. Regardless of differences among institutions, students, and teaching styles, all of us writing teachers conduct classes, make assignments, and comment on student writing. Good writing teachers approach this work in ways that seem to some to depart from traditional methods of teaching. The skill a good writing teacher possesses is the ability to question those methods, to keep asking "How should I do this?" Many traditional teaching practices we inherited were meant to help students learn grammar or literature or other

academic subjects. As we've revised our understanding of what people do when they write, we've also had to review how we teach writing. We've had to redefine what teaching and learning mean in a writing class, where what we teach and what students learn is not a body of facts but a process, an activity which requires practice. It's appropriate, then, to rethink what goes on in a writing class, what makes a good writing assignment, and what our comments say to students about their writing. All three questions address the relationships among students, teachers, and a subject called "the composing process." Because these questions require us to know who says what to whom for what purpose, because they are questions rhetoric has always concerned itself with, the answers, I think, will come from viewing teaching as a rhetorical art.

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